

Contributor Profile: Estonia

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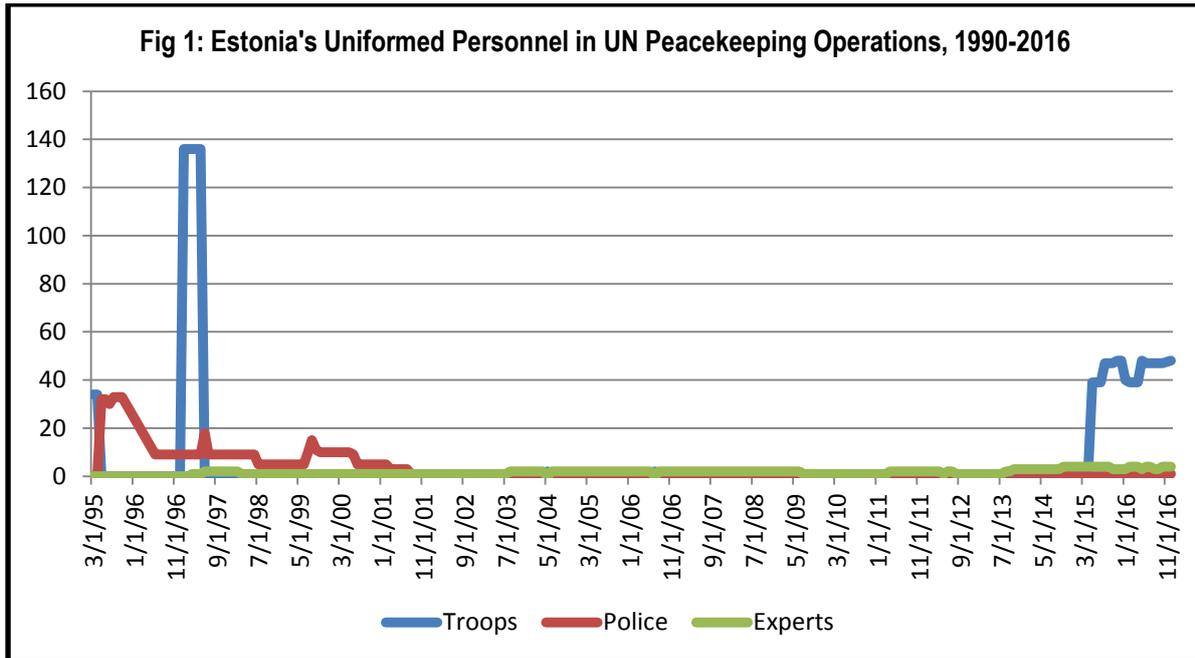
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Active armed forces ¹	Helicopters & fixed-wing transport	Defense Budget	UN Peacekeepers	UN Contribution Breakdown	Other Significant Deployments ²
Active (2016): 6,400	0 Attack helicopters	2016: \$503m (2.15% of GDP)	53 (2 female) 31 Jan. 2017	MINUSMA: 10 troops	Afghanistan (Resolute Support): 6
World Ranking (size): 138th	4 (R-44 <i>Raven II</i>)	2015: \$449m (1.96% of GDP)	Ranking: 81	UNIFIL: 38 troops (1 woman)	Iraq (Inherent Resolve): 10
Army: 5,700 Navy: 400 Air: 300	Transport helicopters	2014: \$512m (1.93% of GDP)	(15 th largest EU contributor)	UNMIK: 1 policewoman	Kosovo (KFOR): 2
+ Defense League 15,800	2 (AN-2 <i>Colt</i>) Fixed-Wing Transport	2013: \$482m (1.91% of GDP)		UNTSO: 4 experts	Ukraine (OSCE): 7
		World Ranking (size): 85th			Mali (EUTM): 10
Defense Spending / Troop: US\$83,833 (compared to global average of approx. US\$77,070) ³					

Part 1: Recent Trends⁴

After a long absence, Estonia's contribution to UN peacekeeping has increased considerably since 2015. In addition to the handful of observers Estonia provided to UNTSO continuously since March 1997, it has contributed an infantry platoon to the Finnish/Irish battalion of the UNIFIL mission since May 2015, and a contingent of up to 10 personnel to MINUSMA since September 2013. These are relatively small military deployments by Estonian standards; nonetheless they are the country's first substantive UN peacekeeping contributions since the mid-1990s, when company-sized units were deployed for single rotations to UNPROFOR and UNIFIL under Danish and Norwegian command. These early experiences of UN peacekeeping, which can be seen in Figure 1 as a spike in contributions in 1996/7, took place in the context of international military support to developing Baltic defense capability following the restoration of the three states' independence; supervised operational deployments were seen as an essential aspect of the capability development program.

For almost as long as it has been able to deploy military units abroad, Estonia's clear preference has been to participate in NATO-led operations, coalition operations led by NATO Allies and, to a lesser extent, EU-led operations. It has thus since 1996 sent forces in relatively large numbers to Bosnia and Herzegovina, to Afghanistan and to Iraq, often exceeding 400 individual troops per year in the mid- to late-2000s. Estonia's [security policy](#) attaches great importance to the simple fact of being present and visible in international operations, and thus to being seen not just as a consumer, but also as a provider, of security. The lack of NATO- or US-led operations following the drawdowns from Afghanistan and Iraq was a key factor in persuading the Estonian leadership to seek out opportunities to participate once again in UN peacekeeping. A timely combination of circumstances provided Estonia with the opportunity to take part in UNIFIL, which is currently its largest international military deployment.



Estonia was not present at the 2014 Peacekeeping Leaders' Summit, but attended the 2015 Summit with the support of the US on the basis of its high per capita contribution to UN operations. However, Estonia was unable to make any further concrete pledges. Moreover, its contribution (mostly to UNIFIL and MINUSMA) had arisen through ad hoc decisions, rather than through any long-term plan to increase its engagement with UN peacekeeping. These reasons would also have prevented Estonia from making any pledges at the 2016 UN Peacekeeping Defense Ministerial in London, which it consequently did not attend.

Part 2: Decision-Making Process

The expectation that the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) will participate in international missions under the auspices of the UN (and other bodies) is stipulated in the 2011 [National Defence Strategy](#), which states: "In the field of international activities associated with national defence, the Defence Forces shall ... participate in operations lead by NATO, the EU, the UN or a coalition of the willing". The overall provisions governing their participation are set out in the 2016 [National Defence Act](#). The Act requires that international deployments should be mandated by the Riigikogu (Parliament of Estonia). In practice, this is achieved by passing resolutions drafted by the Ministry of Defence and scrutinized by the Riigikogu's National Defence Committee. The resolutions, each of which specifies the location of the deployment and the maximum number of troops authorized to deploy at any one time, are usually valid for one year.

The small size of Estonia's ministries and military headquarters means that the government's deliberations leading to a decision to participate in an international operation and to request a mandate from the Riigikogu are largely informal and can be completed quite rapidly. There is no fixed process leading up to such a decision; each potential operation is handled case-by-case.

Part 3: Rationales for Contributing

Estonia's contribution to UN peacekeeping is above all a political act, undertaken in the expectation that being an active and visible supporter of the international order should help

it gain the support of others in times of crisis. This transactional logic explains Estonia's preference to deploy military forces on NATO operations – it is in Estonia's interest to take all possible measures to reinforce the strength and cohesion of the organization thought most likely to provide a credible response to any military threat to Estonia's security. However, in the absence of NATO or EU operations – as is the case at present – the same logic extends to providing UN peacekeepers.

Political Rationales: Estonia regards itself as a state in a vulnerable geographical position to which history has not been kind. In response, its [security policy](#) emphasizes that it seeks security through the membership of international and regional organizations and military alliances, in particular NATO. Among the obligations that go with NATO and EU membership is the expectation that all member states should make appropriate contributions to these organizations' operations. Historically, a high level of participation in such operations was a key pillar of Estonia's campaign for NATO membership, which was achieved in 2004. Today, Estonia's wish to be seen also as a security provider, especially with the arrival in 2017 of a NATO battalion under the Enhanced Forward Presence program tipping the scale in the direction of security consumption. This requires that its contribution should be substantial. Deploying military forces in furtherance of the goals of the international organizations to which it belongs is a relatively easy and visible means of achieving this goal and NATO's target of having 10% of a member state's armed forces deployed at any one time is seen as an appropriate – though rarely achieved – level of ambition. UN peacekeeping offers an opportunity to contribute to this target when there are few NATO and EU operations demanding troop contributions.

A second key political rationale cited in the [National Defence Strategy](#) is that, "Participation in international operations will be used to intensify co-operation with Estonia's strategic allies." Clearly this refers primarily to NATO Allies, but it is noteworthy that a key reason for contributing to UNIFIL is that it offered Estonia an opportunity to work hand-in-hand with Finland, considered to be one of Estonia's closest allies but, as a non-NATO member, one with which there had been few opportunities to cooperate.

Economic Rationales: UN reimbursements are not a factor in Estonia's decision to provide UN peacekeepers. However, the EDF recognizes that foreign deployments are valuable for recruiting and retaining personnel; one aspect of this is financial benefits that accrue to individual soldiers when they deploy abroad.

Institutional Rationales: The EDF regards participation in international operations as valuable means of providing its personnel with training and mission experience, of deepening cooperation with other nations' armed forces and of evaluating materiel and procedures. In general, the preference has been for involvement in warfighting operations, where these benefits are thought most likely to be realized and to be most relevant to the EDF's primary mission of national defense. However after Estonia's recent return to UNIFIL, the EDF has come to recognize that UN peacekeeping provides soldiers with additional skills – such as judgement, communication, and conflict management – that are also valuable for professional development.

Normative Rationales: As a small state, Estonia is committed to upholding the principles of international law, including through its support to the UN and to UN peacekeeping.

Part 4: Barriers to Contributing

Alternative institutional preferences for crisis management: When such operations exist, Estonia's clear preference is to contribute to those led by NATO and the EU, or to coalitions led by key allies. As the [National Defence Strategy](#) states: "Estonia sees NATO and EU operations as a priority, though it does not rule out participation in any other operation led by a coalition of the willing or another organization." This factor was largely responsible for Estonia's very small contributions to UN peacekeeping from the mid-1990s until recently.

Alternative political or strategic priorities: Estonia's overriding defense policy objective is to create readiness for the defense of its national territory. Some decision-makers see participation in UN peacekeeping operations as geographically and conceptually remote from this aim. While this may not prevent Estonia from contributing, it may impact the size of the contribution.

Financial costs: While there is a strong consensus in favor of maintaining, and even increasing Estonia's defense budget as a percentage of GDP, its GDP, and thus its defense budget in cash terms, is small. While this may not prevent Estonia from contributing to peacekeeping, it may place limits on the scale and location of its contribution. In UNIFIL, for example, Estonia's financial burden is lessened by its operational partnership with Finland, but a long-standing, independent deployment to a distant theatre would put a prohibitive strain on the EDF's finances.

Absence of pressure to contribute: While Estonia's preference is to work within NATO and EU frameworks, it is also the case that these organizations put more pressure on their members to contribute than does the UN. On the other hand, Estonian decision-makers report that it is often difficult to contribute troops to UN peacekeeping, as the available slots are quickly filled by nations better plugged in to the UN's peacekeeping machinery.

Lack of fit with legislative, procurement and operational timelines: As the EDF is small and still maturing, an international deployment can substantially disrupt force development processes such as the introduction of major new equipment. Further, the deployment of specialist capabilities can have a disproportionate effect in reducing the capacity that remains at home. Finally, while it may not involve actual deployments, the requirement to have troops standing ready for rotational commitments to the EU Battlegroups and NATO's reaction forces also limits the forces that are available for UN peacekeeping.

Part 5: Current Challenges and Issues

Estonia is fortunate inasmuch as there is broad consensus in favor of its current defense policies and postures across all mainstream political parties and throughout the population. As part of this, the value of participating in international operations is widely accepted and any contribution to UN peacekeeping will receive strong support. Further, defense spending, and within it spending on international operations, are seen as priorities and the defense budget is insulated to the greatest extent possible from global financial difficulties.

At present, these factors are unlikely to change. Estonia will thus remain willing to contribute to UN peacekeeping when it is able to do so. The main risk to this continued contribution is the competition for forces from NATO, EU and coalition operations, which will almost certainly be seen as priorities.

As a relative newcomer to UN peacekeeping, Estonia has not been overly exercised by the

politics of or administrative arrangements for UN peacekeeping. This too is unlikely to change – these issues are not priorities for policymakers and Estonia’s desire to be present in international operations has vested in the Ministry of Defence and EDF a “can do” attitude.

Part 6: Key Champions and Opponents

There are no particular champions of UN peacekeeping in Estonia. The Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs have generally been more positive about foreign deployments than the EDF. The deployment of Estonian troops abroad, however, has rarely been controversial with the public, media or members of the parliament (the 2014 deployment to the EUFOR RCA mission (in Central African Republic) was something of an exception to this, with the idea initially receiving some criticism from certain sections of the media and opposition parliamentarians). Providing UN peacekeepers is certainly not a difficult policy to support, especially as it is seen as a much safer prospect than the EDF’s recent deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. Insofar as arguments are made against peacekeeping deployments, the concern is the extent to which they detract from the EDF’s primary mission of preparing for the defense of the homeland. Such arguments were more common in the early years of Estonia’s defense development and tended to come from former or serving military personnel. A combination of greater confidence in its own security through NATO membership and an established consensus on the benefits of deploying troops abroad means that such arguments are rarely heard today.

Part 7: Capabilities and Caveats

Estonia’s armed forces are small and around half of their active strength comprises the annual conscript intake. Troops for international operations are largely drawn from the fully professional Scouts Battalion, the rapid response unit of the 1st infantry brigade, currently being equipped with CV90 Infantry Fighting Vehicles. In addition to infantry soldiers, Estonia is also able to deploy a mine clearance unit, Special Forces troops, medical staff and staff officers. Since 2015, it has provided intelligence personnel to MINUSMA’s All Sources Information Fusion Unit. Women make up a little over 11% of the active duty EDF, however they serve in roles that are not usually targeted for recruitment for UN peacekeeping operations. While women do deploy on UN missions, they are underrepresented in comparison with the total EDF population. It is a point of pride for the Estonian defense establishment that the EDF operate abroad with minimal caveats or restrictions.

Part 8: Further Reading

Lawrence, Tony, Tomas Jermalavičius and Anna Bulakh. [*Soldiers of Peace. Estonia, Finland and Ireland in UNIFIL*](#). Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2016.

Paljak, Piret. “Participation in International Operations” in Tony Lawrence and Tomas Jermalavičius (eds.), [*Apprenticeship, Partnership, Membership: Twenty Years of Defence Development*](#), Tallinn: International Centre for Defence Studies, 2013, pp.202-245.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise stated, data is drawn from IISS, *The Military Balance 2016* (London: IISS/Routledge, 2017).

² Source: Ministry of Defence of Estonia.

³ Armed Forces spending is a country’s annual total defense budget (in US dollars) divided by the total number of active armed forces. Using figures from IISS, *The Military Balance 2017*.

⁴ The research for this profile is based on interviews with decision-makers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, the Ministry of Defence of Estonia, and with the Estonian Defence Forces.